Opinion: Water bond will fail if it remains bloated

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the Feb. 5, 2012, Sacramento Bee.*

If we had our druthers, we'd let voters decide this November on the once-delayed $11.1 billion water bond, passed by lawmakers in 2009. The sooner voters dispatch this albatross, putting it out of its misery, the sooner California can get serious about smarter and more equitable alternatives for financing needed water infrastructure.

But the very thing that makes this bond so unappealing — its excess flab, the debt payments it will foist on a cash-poor state — are the things prompting Gov. Jerry Brown to get it off the ballot. Brown is pushing a tax increase initiative in November that he doesn't want tethered to this Hindenburg of a water bond. So he's asking lawmakers to push the water bond off to 2014, in the vague hope that an improving economy will make the measure more attractive to voters.

It's wishful thinking. The economy may improve in two years, but there is no telling if it will bring more water-generous voters to the polls than may show up this year.

Intriguingly, a recent Field Poll shows that voters are generally in favor of investing in water projects. But polls also show that few Southern Californians even know that their water comes out of this place known as the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Perhaps by waiting two years, the water community could help educate Californians that the Delta is not just an outlet of the Mississippi.

If they put off the vote, lawmakers should rethink the assumptions and process that produced this water bond. As is too often the case, this infrastructure package was the

product of a group shakedown. If San Joaquin farmers were to get their reservoir, then San Diego insisted it get $100 million to raise a dam and Lake Tahoe supporters wanted their $100 million. Projects were added merely to win votes, with far too few requirements that beneficiaries of water projects put up their own money to share in the costs.

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